

[Staff conference in industrial folklore]

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Shorthand reporter - Bessie Jaffey

Staff Conference in Industrial Folklore July 13, 1939

Present: Aaron, Algren, Conroy, Engstrand, Gershman, Polachek, Ross, and Walker.

Algren: The purpose of this meeting is to inaugurate a new line in the accumulation of industrial folklore. We're going to let Chicago, as such, go and collect material appropriate to a national volume approximating THESE ARE OUR LIVES.

The people on the New York Project are doing almost straight dialogue for this volume. We have an example here from the recent American Writers Congress in New York. It's the feeling of the New York Writers that realism in American letters will become increasingly documentary. I think the best way to explain their idea is to read what one worker on the New York Project is doing. He seems to have the idea down a little more sharply than some of the others.

(Here, samples of New York Workers documents were read:)

"I'm a-might-Have-Been", by a document by Mr. Hyde Partnow appearing in April-May issue of Direction magazine. Read by Mr. Ross.

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"The Pluck-Trimmer", a document by Mr. Carl Uhlarik, appearing in June-July issue of Direction magazine. Read by Mr. Algren.

Following this an article by Mr. Ben Gershman was read to illustrate work on the local staff. Title of Mr. Gershmans document: SHOE-HORN IN MY HAND.

Q. Is the nation national book to be edited from Chicago?

A. No, from Washington. Were it will be published without guarantee guarantees .

Conroy: I met a fellow Dorson from the Rutland Press. He's got a lot of tall stories of Davy Crockett. He has a lot of old woodcuts showing all sorts of incredible feats.

Algren: The point of these documents is that they reveal what is really a new way of writing - which we'll attempt here.

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(Here The Folk and the Writer, an introduction to the Folklore Craft session of the [?] congress by Dr. B. A. Botkin, was read by Mr. Conroy.)

Engstrand: Have you spoke about interviewing? Possibly, if you can [get?] a person talking they can keep on going without getting anywhere. You must approach them with an idea in mind. [Take?] a business man, for example. He pays too much taxes. There's your story—"I pay too much taxes." It gives the story something to hang on. Otherwise they just ramble all over and don't get anywhere:

Algren: Sometime if you just let them ramble, they might say more than if they feel you've got an idea in your mind.

Conroy: An interviewer has to be extremely skillful, otherwise they might try to please you.

Walker: If they have one thing in their mind, they'll just go back to it and keep repeating it.

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Conroy: An in gathering this folklore, it seems to me it's just better to let them talk and then sift the chaff.

Engstrand: Well, we had some interviews that just didn't seem to get anywhere.

Conroy: It requires skill on the part of the interviewer. He has to know what he's looking for.

Aaron: This question of editing the material. Our forms say unedited.

Algren: It'll have to be edited ultimately. In writing it up, you've got to use discretion, especially about insertions of obscenity. This may be naturalism, but we aren't working here as individuals: we're working in a group observed by the society about it, and what appears to be "naturalism" may not be at all worth the cost. Let's not stick out our necks for a fetish.

Ross: In relation to the interview, not taking it down verbatim but listening to it and then going back into your memory and writing it up. If I [tried?] to take a verbatim interview, I think it's impossible unless you can take shorthand. There seems to be a question about the two methods. The one method where you go back into your memory is a more creative one. In recreating the interview so that you can get all these punch images—the things that hit your mind while the [interviewee?] was talking. That seems to be the tone of "I am a might-have-been." Whereas if you were to take down a verbatim interview you will find images and sharp statements spread all through the thing which you will probably have to sift out in editing. Or perhaps not. The mere fact that a man will speak drily and uninterestingly [uninterestingly?] will [?] a certain character as it were.

Aaron: I know a cab driver that uses vile, profane terms. I can't use them.

(Here two papers from the recent Writers' Congress were read to illustrate comparative uses of shorthand [,?] and dependence upon memory as methods: Getting material from Hospitals: Vogel Vogel Creative Listeners: [Partnew Partnew ?])

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Algren: It seems that the idea would be that we are interested in contemporary folklore which differs widely from the old conventional idea of the tall story. That is, the document which substitutes dialogue for just a sort of literary pattern is the most contemporary form of folk literature and that will probably have a significance in the future that would also be termed "proletarian literature" in for some years to come. In a [?] they They are the same thing.

Conroy: About the earlier forms, this fellow Dorson from the Rutland Press is interested in discovering if some of them survived.

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He finds his material in old almanacs which are very rare. They were cheaply printed and widely circulated. He believes that a great many of these tall tales have survived in the form of industrial lore, which may be true. I think it would be interesting to make an investigation.

The conference was concluded with a reading, by Mr. Aaron, of a section of his material on Chicago Post-office workers.